Food Talks – Summary notes from online discussion
COVID-19 AND FOOD SYSTEMS: WE ARE ALL EMERGENCY RESPONDENTS

31st March 2020, 12.00-13.30

COVID-19 will directly affect many people's health and sadly result in more fatalities. Facing job losses, school closures, increased physical isolation and strained food supply chains, COVID-19 will also impact many people's access to food. Already our emergency food aid providers are under stress, noting a rise in users and a drop in donations. Panic stockpiling challenging just-in-time supply chains are increasingly leaving supermarket shelves empty, while school closures put at risk many children across the country who rely on free school meals to be fed. This pandemic is revealing the failings and fragility of the dominant food system.

How can we ensure the most vulnerable members of our community are cared for and fed? How should our short-term emergency responses be coupled with longer-term systemic change which builds food systems more able to deal with shocks? What does an urgent, collective, considered response look like? What positive actions can we take as individuals? How can we build a more resilient food system given the dominant consumer markets?

In challenging times, it is important to carve out spaces to discuss the issues we face, to share thoughts, experience and expertise, and to work out ways to collectively move forward. This event was an online discussion, hosted by Dan Crossley, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council, and including short contributions from food and systems change experts:

- Dee Woods – Granville Community Kitchen, IFAN and member of the Food Ethics Council
- Kath Dalmeny – Chief Executive, Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming
- Dr John Ingram - Associate Professor and lead of ECI Food Programme, University of Oxford
- Sara Venn – Incredible Edible Bristol

The event was aimed at people working to create positive change in the food system (including London Food Link members) and members of Impact Hub Kings Cross, but was open to all.

The following notes are a summary of the many questions, insights, experiences, and knowledge shared between the four speakers and 80+ participants. **The video recording can be found here (start at 2 min 48 seconds).**

#FoodTalks is brought to you by a partnership of the Food Ethics Council, Impact Hub Kings Cross, Organico, and London Food Link, part of Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming.

Short-term food responses to COVID-19

Third sector

- Bottom-up vs top-down responses: In many cases, local authorities have been slower at responding to the emergency than local community groups. Huge response from volunteers, community food hubs, local growers, etc.

- Emergency food aid organisations, which were already under huge pressure, are now experiencing unprecedented demands and are expected to be able to deal with the sudden increase in need coupled with a decrease in supply/ donations. If these organisations were already running low on food and funds, these have been exacerbated within the past few weeks. So far with limited assistance from local authorities and national governments, these frontline organisations have had to weather a lot of the crisis response on their own. Thankfully, there has been a tremendous response from new voluntary and community-driven groups across the country (e.g. mutual aid groups).

Citizens

- Volunteer groups have been setting up food hubs, taking orders online or by phone, for home delivery.

- Increasing support for people wanting to grow their own food, but also to empower hobby-growers or growing communities (e.g. Incredible Edible network) to give food to local communities.

Government

- Government response so far has focussed on identifying who is medically vulnerable, and economic vulnerability is only just now being recognised in the public policy sphere. This is vital when thinking about access to food. The Government is putting a strategy in place to try to address food needs, including offering food parcels to the vulnerable. This is welcome, albeit improvements are needed on ensuring food is nutritious and culturally-appropriate. How can we help government?

Businesses and social enterprises

- Many businesses have changed their business models very quickly, converting to box schemes, lending their shop space, storing capacity, cooking facilities, diverting products to where most needed, etc. to support the shifting food networks

- Huge rise in attention on local/small food businesses and producers by general public. It is important to highlight these to a government who so far has had the tendency to speak mostly to their 'usual friends', the major corporates.

Immediate needs from across the sector

- **Connect, connect, connect**! Overarching message is that reaching out to our local groups and networks now is key to regaining stability.
- We need to **take pressure off emergency food aid providers**. Food banks should not be expected to meet such massive need.
- **More money in people's pockets** needed as soon as possible. Some positive actions from government raising Universal Credit, but thousands of new applicants still not able to access it. **We, as a collective voice of organisations, businesses, citizens, can push for policy change.**

- While currently offering grab&go, take-away and delivery services, the move for emergency food aid organisations is likely to go towards 100% delivery. **Support is needed for food deliveries to happen effectively and to reach out the most vulnerable**.

- Growing **concerns over longer term access to fresh produce**: While there has been an influx of fresh & frozen goods for emergency food aid organisations, this is expected to dry up soon.

- **Immediate need for storage solutions**: At organisation level, but also individual level, freezers have been loaned by businesses/restaurants in order to preserve food.

- Need for **more/better advice for small businesses and local food networks to manage social distancing** while remaining opened. This is particularly true for local markets, which receive unclear and ever-changing information about whether they should remain open at all or not.

- **Huge data gaps** identified in order to respond to shock. For example, what can the ONS tell us about culturally varied communities and hence their need for culturally appropriate food?

- **Need for more nutritionists / dieticians involved in the conversation** higher up the chain (e.g. at the food parcel planning stage), and ensure people with medical/dietary needs are catered for in the response.

- Provide **access to cooking facilities**, not just for organisations but for families too.

- **Raises the profile of small/local producers**, suppliers, retailers.

- Provide **adequate information and support to access benefits** and financial support.

- **Free-up land for horticulture.**

Things to watch out for

- Emergency food aid is a *short-term* response. Let's ensure we do not further entrench a model that doesn't tackle root causes, and instead focus on *resilience.*

- As we respond to food needs, let us remember everything else that creates community resilience: connection, growing spaces, cooking spaces, local employment, mental health support, adequate levels of communication pathways, etc.

- Risk that products with long-shelf life may be overvalued during the crisis, when fresh produce is so important from a health perspective.

Evolving narrative

- We've gone from knowing to feeling the importance of social services in this country. Let's not forget this. The NHS was born following WWII, what will emerge from COVID-19? **Let us be the witnesses of this time.**

- There is a current reframing of food as a *commodity* to food as a *resource*.

- Need to reframe from food *availability* to food *access* (which includes financial access, i.e. affordability, as well as physical and social access). Opportunity to reframe what accessing food looks like, not just shopping at the supermarket, but also growing food, accessing community gardens, directly from producers, etc.

- The media story is cushioning the experience of the most vulnerable. Many people have been vulnerable and unable to access good food for a long time. There is a danger that their experience gets lost amid the experiences of the more affluent middle-class stockpiling and self-isolating while working from home.

Medium to Long-term responses

- Not only are we responding to the impacts of COVID-19 now, we are also building the foundations for a new world and new food systems.

- We should aim for a public inquiry on the needs for an effective contingency planning, question why current planning capacity has not been able to prepare us for this shock.

- Put systems in place that acknowledge and capitalise on our *interconnections*, rather than work in silos

- Think of food not only produced, but also processed locally. How can we rebuild local infrastructure for milling, cutting, part and full processing as well as other needs for farmers and growers?

- We, as a collective, need to discuss what *resilient* food systems mean. Crucially, we need to ask ourselves: resilient (1) of what (i.e. food system outcomes), (2) to what (either stress, which comes gradually yet powerfully, or shock, such as conflict, food scares, or pandemics), (3) for whom (i.e. individual people on the food chain or society as a whole), and (4) over what time period. Resilience is about (A) robustness, (B) recovery, and (C) re-orientation. With re-orientation is an opportunity to re-organise our thinking around food.

Key questions that remain

- What can we learn: about our data needs, from other sectors (including care nutritionists), who is considered vulnerable, what products are considered crucial, etc.?

- What can newcomers to emergency food aid learn from already established organisations and networks, in order to avoid recreating unwanted consequences?

- How do we equitably distribute food, if the country goes into rationing in particular? What are the ethics of rationing? How can we equitably support people *who were already in need of food before COVID-19*?

- There is some evidence emerging of impacts on food prices in the US. In the UK, there are predictions of price rises on fresh produce in future months due to pressures on production and there may be a 20% drop in yield. If and when food prices go up, who will actually earn that extra margin? Initial trends in the USA show producers aren't accessing that extra cash.

- As the Global South is starting to get hit by COVID-19, what does that mean for our food imports (and what could we do to help)?

- As rural are often more geographically isolated, what does that community response look like?

- In a world of physical distancing and increased digital connection, what happens to those without online access?

Resources already out there

- ❖ How is your enterprise responding to COVID-19? – The Open Food Network
- ❖ Growing Communities' heightened hygiene precautions
- ❖ Sustainable Food Places COVID-19 digest (with guidance for food markets)
- ❖ COVID-19 briefing for local authorities – Food Sense Wales
- ❖ Coronavirus Food Alert: ongoing resources for practitioners - frontline and local authority - including webinars available from Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming
- ❖ Harnessing the power of food citizenship – Food Ethics Council
- ❖ Dignity in Practice – Nourish Scotland
- ❖ A letter to the UK from Italy – The Guardian

The moderator summarised what COVID(-19) should stand for in relation to our food response:

C for **Community**, **Compassion**, **Coordination**

O for **Organisation**, **Open-heartedness**, **Optimism**

V for protecting **Vulnerable** people and supporting **Volunteers**

I for **Inspiration** and **Ingenuity**

D for **Dedication** and treating people with **Dignity**